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John Muir

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A Land of Abundance — A Canoe Voyage Among the Islands and Icebergs.

Magnificent Scenery—The Hoona Indians—Among the Salmon.

[SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE OF THE BULLETIN.]

IN CAMP, NEAR CAPE FANSHAW, August 18, 1880.

How delightful it is, and how it makes one's pulses bound to get back again into the heart of this grand old northland wilderness, with its giant mountains, glaciers, forests, cataracts, its maze of canals and fiords glowing with sun spangles, and its life-giving air without dust or taint, scented only by the pitch and gum of the woods, and kelp and dulse of the sea. How truly wild it is, and how joyously one's heart responds to the welcome it gives. Drifting along the shores of its network of channels, we may travel thousands of miles without seeing any mark of man, save at long intervals some little Indian village or faint smoke of a camp fire in some sheltered cove. But even these are confined to the shore. Back a few yards from the beach we are among bushes, with not a leaf out of place, and on forest carpets of moss as trackless as the sky, while the mountains far above the forests, wrapt in their snow and ice and clouds, seem never before to have been even looked at.

A LAND OF ABUNDANCE.

Alaska is full of food for man and beast, body and soul, though few are seeking it as yet. Were one-tenth part of the attractions that this country has to offer made known to the world, thousands would come every year, and not a few of them to stay and make homes. At present, however, Alaska is out of sight, though by no means so far and inaccessible as most people seem to suppose. The California, a good, well-appointed little steamer of some 700 tons burthen, makes twelve trips a year to Fort Wrangel and Sitka, leaving Portland on the 1st of every month, the actual sailing time between the last-named points being only about five days.

GLACIAL SCENERY.

The magnificent glacial scenery to the north and east of Sitka is also brought within easy reach by the reliable little steamer Favorite, belonging to the Northwestern Trading Company. She sails once a month, or oftener, from Sitka, going as far north as the mouths of the Chilcat and Chilcoot rivers. By this way tourists may obtain views of the celebrated Alaska icebergs that all the world has heard of, and so few even of those who have visited the country have ever seen.

CANOE TRAVEL.

But for those who really care to come into hearty contact with the country, making a long, crooked voyage in a canoe with Indians is by far the better way. The larger canoes made by these Indians will carry from one to three tons, rise lightly over any waves likely to be met on these inland channels, go well under sail, and are easily paddled along shore in calm water or against moderate winds, while snug harbors, where they may ride at anchor or be pulled up on a smooth beach, are to be found almost everywhere. With plenty of provisions packed in boxes, and blankets and warm clothing in rubber or canvas bags, you may be truly independent, and enter into partnership with nature; be carried with the winds and currents, accept the noble invitations offered all along your way to enter the sublime rock portals of the mountain fiords, the homes of the waterfalls and the glaciers, and encamp every night in fresh, leafy coves, carpeted with flower-enammelled mosses, beneath wide outspreading branches of the evergreens, accommodations compared with which the best to be found in artificial palaces are truly vulgar and mean.

I left Fort Wrangel on the 16th of this month, accompanied by Mr. Young, who is a missionary, and also a man, in a cedar canoe about 25 feet long and 5 wide, carrying two small square sails, and manned by two Stickine Indians and a half-breed. The day was calm and bright, while fleecy clouds, filled with sunshine, hung about the lowest of the mountain brows, while far above the clouds the peaks were seen in the deep blue sky stretching grandly away to right and left in rows and clusters, rising rugged and dark out of broad, waving fields of ice and snow, and shining in as calm a light as that which was falling on the glassy waters beneath them. Our Indians seemed to welcome the work that lay before them, dipping their oars in exact time, and pulling with hearty good will, while we glided past island after island across the delta of the Stickine into Souchoi channel.

AMONG THE ICEBERGS.

By noon we came in sight of a fleet of icebergs, coming into Souchoi Channel from a glacier that flows into the head of a magnificent Yosemite fiord, about twenty miles to the northwest of the mouth of the Stickine river. This is the southmost, as far as I have observed, of the glaciers of the Pacific Coast that flow directly into the sea and send off bergs. It is well known to the Indians, who glide about among the bergs in the smallest of their canoes to hunt seals, though not at all to the whites about Fort Wrangel, though living year after year within less than a day's distance of it. I discovered it last year by tracing the bergs that I found in the open channel up through the narrow high-walled fiord to their source, making my way for a distance of at least twelve miles through water fairly crowded with bergs, much against the will of our Indians, who feared that their canoe would be broken. The Indian name of this icy fiord is Hutli, or Thunder Bay, from the sound made by the bergs in falling and rising from the snout of the inflowing glacier.

BEAUTIFUL SCENERY—CAMPING.

We floated happily on over the shining water, the mountains of the mainland on our right, Mitgoff, Kuprianoff, and innumerable smaller nameless islands on our left. Salmon were seen here and there, leaping three or four feet into the air, showing their silvery sides for a moment, then falling with a plash and leaving a mark of foambells and widening circles of wavelets. Flocks of gulls, some of them snowy white, slowly winnowed the air overhead, or alighted about the canoe, their smooth breast just touching the water. Ducks, too, of many species were very abundant, rising again and again as we approached, and keeping well ahead of us, or merely diving until we had passed them. The beauty of the islands, appearing in ever-changing pictures as we advanced, were an unfailing source of enjoyment; but chiefly our attention was turned upon the mountains whence all our blessings flow. Now a series of bold granite headlands would fix the eye, or some peak of surpassing grandeur or beauty of sculpture, or some one of the larger glaciers seen exactly in front, its gigantic arms and fingers clasping entire groups of peaks, and its huge trunk sweeping to the sea between huge gray domes and ridges, breaking here and there into shattered cascades, with azure light filling the crevaces and making the most dangerous and inaccessible portion of the glacier the most beautiful of all. Amid such pictures and lessons as these our first day wore away. About sunset the Indians set our tent beneath a Menzies spruce at the mouth of a glacier stream, and spread our blankets on moss two feet deep. The length of the day's sail being about forty miles.

AN ANCIENT ICE RIVER.

Next morning we sailed around an outcurving bank of boulders and sand ten miles long, that is shoved forward into the channel, and about half exposed at low tide. This curved embankment, of which Point Vanderpent is the most prominent portion, is the terminal moraine, of a grand old glacier that was at least ten miles wide, and united with the ice-sheet that formerly filled all the channels along the coast. It is located just opposite three large converging glaciers, which formerly united to form the vanished trunk of the glacier to which the moraine under consideration belonged. Because we happened along here in our canoe a few centuries too late, we have missed the grandest feature in the landscape. Enough is left, however, of this noble old ice river to enable us to restore it by means of the imagination, and see it again about as vividly as if present in the flesh, with snow-clouds crawling about its fountains, the sunshine sparkling on its broad, undulating bosom, and its lofty ten-mile ice-wall planted in the deep waters of the channel and sending off its bergs with loud, resounding thunder, night and day, winter and summer, at the rate of one every two or three minutes.

About noon we rounded Cape Fanshaw, scudding swiftly on before a fine breeze, to the delight of our Indians who had now only to steer and chat. Here we came up with two Hoona Indians and their families, who, as they informed us, had been to Fort Wrangel to trade. They had exchanged five sea otter furs, worth about a hundred dollars apiece, and a considerable number of fur-seal, land otter, marten, beaver and other furs and skins, some $800 worth, for a new canoe valued at $80, a few barrels of molasses for the manufacture of rum, provisions, tobacco, blankets, etc.; the blankets not to wear but to keep as money, for the almighty dollar of these tribes is a blanket. The wind died away soon after we met, and as the two canoes glided slowly side by side, the Hoonas made very minute inquiries as to who we were and what we were doing so far north. Mr. Young's object in meeting the Indians as a missionary they could in part understand, but mine in searching for rocks and glaciers seemed wholly past comprehension, and they asked our Indians whether gold mines might not be the main object. They remembered, however, that I had visited their ice-mountains, as they call the glaciers, at Cross Sound a year ago, and seemed to think there might be, after all, some mysterious medicine interest about them of which they were ignorant. Towards the middle of the afternoon they engaged our crew in a race, with three paddles against our three oars. We pushed a little away ahead for a time, but though possessing a considerable advantage, as it would seem, in our long oars, they at length overtook us and kept up until after dark, when we camped here together in the rain among tall dripping grass and bushes, some twenty-five miles beyond Cape Fanshaw.

PHOSPHORESCENT WATERS—SALMON CATCHING.

These cold Northern waters are at times about as brilliantly phosphorescent as those of the warm South, and so they were last night in the rain and darkness, with the temperature of the water at 49° Fahrenheit, the air 51°. Every stroke of the oar made a vivid surge of white light, and the canoes left a shining track that faded back into the cold gloom.

As we neared the mouth of the salmon stream, where we intended making our camp, we noticed jets and flashes of silvery light caused by the startled movements of the salmon that were on their way up the stream to spawn. These became more and more numerous and exciting, and our Indians shouted joyfully: "Hi yu salmon! Hi yu salmon! Hi yu muck-a-muck!" while the water about the canoe and beneath the canoe was churned by a thousand fins into silver fire. After landing ten of our men to commence camp work, Mr. Young and myself went with our other Indian, Tyeen, a few yards up the stream in the canoe to the foot of a brawling rapid, to see him capture a few salmon. The water everywhere seemed to be literally filled with them, and as they darted in frightened masses to right and left, we ap-

peared to be sailing in boiling, seething silver, marvelously relieved in the jet darkness. Amid the play of these silver waves, and the specially vivid flashes made by the fish darting straight ahead, and the surges made by their doubling suddenly with bent tails, our attention was fixed for a moment by a long, steady, comet-like blaze moving directly toward us from the black, shadowy bank of the stream. On it came, over the salmon and through their midst, intensifying the general auroral glow. But when the portentous object reached the canoe it proved to be only our dog—a very small cause of a very big effect.

After getting the canoe into a tide eddy, at the foot of the rapids, Tyeen caught half a dozen salmon in a few minutes, by means of a large hook fastened to the end of a pole. They were so abundent that he simply groped for them in a random way, or aimed at them by the light they themselves furnished. That a skillful Indian can thus procure in a single hour sufficient food to last a month, is a striking illustration of the marvelous fruitfulness of these Alaskan waters.

A LOVELY SCENE.

This morning we found out how beautiful a nook we had got into. Besides the charming picturesqueness of its lines, the colors about it are varied and bright in the rain and exquisitely interblended, making a fine study for a painter. Viewed from the shore there is first a margin of dark-brown algae, then a bar of yellowish brown, next a dark bar on the rugged rocks marking the highest tides, then a bar of gray granite with grasses in the seams, and above this a thick bossy overleaning fringe of bushes colored red and yellow and green, and then the dense beveled wall of spruces, their spiry tops seen rising above one another and sweeping in a fine curve around our little nook, a specially picturesque specimen here and there leaning forward over the bright green grass bordering the stream. The menzies spruce is bluish green, the merten spruce and the cedar bright yellow-green, and all more or less draped and tufted with gray and yellow lichens and mosses, the whole producing a delightful effect. Our camp-fire smoke is lying motionless in the branches of the trees like a stranded cloud. The Hoonas are up and stirring, the women and children drying their rags and tending the babies, the two men getting firewood and catching salmon. Down on the beach ducks and sandpipers in flocks of hundreds are getting their breakfast, while whales and porpoises are plunging and blowing outside, and great numbers of bald eagles are seen perched on dead spars along the edge of the woods, heavy-looking and overfed, gazing stupidly like gorged vultures.

AN INDIAN ENCAMPMENT.

Our Hoona friends, camped at a distance 15 or 20 feet from us, were asleep this morning at sunrise, the whole eight lying together in a heap, wet and limp, like dead salmon. A little boy about six years old, with no other covering than a remnant of a shirt that hardly reached below his shoulders, was lying peacefully on his back, like Tam O'Shanter, despising wind, and rain and fire. His brown, bulging abdomen all the more firmly bent on account of the curvature of the ground beneath him, heaving against the rainy sky, bare as a glacial dome, the rain running down from the top of it all around and keeping it as wet as a bowlder on the beach. He is up now, looking happy, and strong and fresh, with no clothes to dry, and no need of washing while this weather lasts. The two babies are firmly strapped on a board, leaving only their heads and hands free. Their mothers are nursing them, holding the boards on end, while they sit on the ground with their breasts level with the little prisoners' mouths. One of them, avigorous chubby little fellow, is holding the long, pendulous, cylindrical breast in both fists, and mumbling at the end of it as if he were eating a sausage. They all seem wretched in their wet rags; nevertheless they are strong and well provided for, while, as regards habits of industry, politeness and nice sense of honor they are, perhaps, the equals of the workers of any civilized nation.

A SALMON SCHOOL.

As for the salmon, as seen this morning urging their way up the swift, brawling current—tens of thousands of them, side by side, with their backs out of water in shallow places—nothing that I could write may possibly give anything like a fair conception of the extravagance of their numbers. There is more salmon apparently, bulk for bulk, than water. In fording the stream the writhing multitudes, crowding against one another, could not get out of one's way. One of our men waded out in the midst of them and amused himself by seizing them above the tail and swinging them over his head. Thousands of them could thus be taken by hand while they are making their way over the shallows among the stones.

Whatever may be said of other resources of the Territory, it is hardly possible to exaggerate the importance of her fisheries. Not to mention cod, herring, halibut, etc., there are probably not less than a thousand salmon streams in southeastern Alaska, as large or larger than this one (about 40 feet wide) crowded with fine salmon every year. The run commenced this year more than a month ago, and the King Salmon, one of the five species recognized by the Indians, was running in the Chilcat river, about the middle of last November.

There are no wheat fields in Alaska, nevertheless, compared with the most fertile portions of all our foodful country, it is pre-eminently the land of plenty.

JOHN MUIR.